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Bay Area lobbies for federal transportation money Spending plan for next 6 years in works now

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Washington -- Bay Area leaders are pounding the pavement in Washington, vigorously lobbying Congress and the Bush administration to ensure that Northern California fares well when the giant six-year transportation spending bill is reauthorized this year.

The two biggest items at stake as Congress considers what could be a \$311.5 billion plan are the Bay Area's consensus top projects -- the Municipal Railway's \$764 million plan to build the Central Subway, an extension of the Third Street light rail line through downtown San Francisco to Chinatown, and the proposed \$3.7 billion BART extension from Fremont to San Jose and Santa Clara.

"We're used to competing, and we think our project competes well," San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales said in Washington earlier this month. Gonzales and others were lobbying on Capitol Hill and at the Transportation Department to make sure money for the 16.3-mile BART extension is part of the new spending plan.

Highway and transit spending are among the most popular programs on Capitol Hill, so just about every member of Congress has a wish list for the new bill, which will replace a \$217 billion six-year program that ends Sept. 30. The existing transportation program has played a key role in such local projects as the \$1.5 billion BART extension to San Francisco International Airport, about half of which has been paid for by the federal government.

California now receives about \$3.7 billion a year under the transportation program, with \$2.3 billion going for highways.

The competition is fierce for a share of the federal money, which comes mainly from gasoline taxes, so localities seek every edge.

In San Jose's case, Gonzales hopes that edge comes from Santa Clara County voters' decision to impose an extra half-cent sales tax on themselves to raise \$6 billion to \$7 billion to finance the BART extension and other transportation projects.

Local and state money should pay for 78 percent of the San Jose BART line, meaning the federal share would be about \$740 million. Gonzales hopes the strong local commitment will convince federal officials that San Jose deserves help with a marquee project in Silicon Valley.

"They're not used to seeing 80 percent funding," Gonzalez said. "They're used to seeing the other way around."

The BART extension and the Muni subway plan already have a leg up because federal money has already been committed to help pay for preliminary plans. Rep. Mike Honda, D-

San Jose, secured \$250,000 earlier this year as a federal down payment to help plan the BART extension and Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, the House's powerful minority leader, got \$1.5 million to help draw up the San Francisco subway.

Another key figure lobbying in Washington has been Celia Kupersmith, general manager of the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District. She's looking for \$113 million to help pay for part of the bridge's \$392 million seismic retrofit.

"Every dollar we get for the bridge is money we don't have to spend. It can go for buses and ferries," said Kupersmith, whose deficit-plagued district has cut transit service.

Kupersmith is a powerful figure because she chairs the American Public Transportation Association, the umbrella group of the nation's transit agencies. Transit gets far less money under the federal transportation program than highways, but the Bay Area, led by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, long ago decided that it would seek more federal funds for transit than road projects.

The Bay Area is pushing for transit's annual share of federal transportation spending to be doubled, from \$7 billion in the current program to \$14 billion by the end of the new six-year plan, Kupersmith said. The region also is working against a proposal that would require local communities to pay half the cost of all transit projects. Currently, transit can qualify for up to 80 percent federal funding.

The far bigger highway program doesn't have such stringent local funding requirements. Kupersmith said such a funding disparity could force some states to choose highways over transit, just to get more federal money. "It's unfair and truly detrimental to keeping decisions at the local level," she said.

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